

The Value of Integrating Internet technologies in HIV Prevention Programming for Jamaican Youth

Presenters: St. Rachel Ustanny and Shellie Ann Anderson

Event: Stakeholders Meeting on HIV Prevention for Youth

Location: Courtleigh Hotel & Suites, 85 Knutsford Boulevard, Kingston 5, Jamaica

Date: Thursday, 9 October 2008

St. Rachel Ustanny

Good morning stakeholders. Let me use this opportunity to thank you all for coming to this very special event. Your presence here today is very significant, as this marks the first time that young people and other key national stakeholders will sit and collaboratively review and come to consensus about the:

- Production of the National Youth Declaration, which outlines specific recommendations for improving HIV Prevention services for Jamaican youth, and
- Establishment of the National Working Group--a supportive body that is aimed at advocating for the implementation of these recommendations at the national level through existing and supportive government, private, and non-government institutions and agencies.

The essence of my presentation today is not to highlight statistics, such as the rates of infections or numbers of affected persons, which is quite common at meetings addressing issues relating to HIV/AIDS. Rather, I deliberately chose to emphasize the value and importance of using Internet technologies to enhance HIV Prevention programming for Jamaican Youth.

This Stakeholders Meeting is a component of the HIV Prevention Project for Youth hosted by FAMPLAN, which was designed to influence leaders and bring attention to the need for improved HIV Prevention services for youth around the four components, which are highlighted in the Report Card on HIV Prevention for girls and young women, Jamaica, these are: Participation and Rights, Availability of Services, Accessibility of Services, and Legal and Policy Provisions.

The Advocacy Project targeted institutional leaders and members of the wider Jamaican community, and has facilitated interaction with more than 100 institutional leaders via telephone and direct mail. Additionally, we have mobilized a strong online community of over 300 unique supporters of the issue of HIV Prevention for Youth. Through this Project we intended to mobilize a strong off and online community of persons who would provide support for the issue and contribute to the establishment, sustainability, and success of the National Working Group, which will influence leaders to support HIV Prevention services.

Over the course of our dialogue with institutional leaders, it became evident that there was a strong interest in the issue, but for some they could not see how they could address it within their own organisations or they felt that it represented a duplication of work that was already being conducted. The big SO WHAT? Question emerged, which gave me a feeling of responsibility for addressing such concerns in this presentation. By the end of this Meeting we hope that in addition to gaining increased appreciation of the value of Internet technologies, institutional leaders will:

1. Recognise the need to augment their existing HIV programmes by integrating issues that are relevant to Youth

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October 9, 2008

2. Collaborate with other national stakeholders to improve their existing programmes based on the recommendations of the National Youth Declaration
3. Create unique opportunities for internal and external stakeholder involvement, for e.g. World AIDS Day in schools; staff workshops; mandatory training courses, which attract credits; identification of a dedicated section in school and public libraries for HIV Prevention materials and its promotion; and the display of the rights of users of health facilities.

In planning for the sustainability of the National Working Group and HIV Prevention programming for youth, it is imperative that leaders recognise and seize the wealth of opportunities provided by Internet technologies, such as blogging, social networking, and online groups and causes, which facilitate sustained recruitment of members, donations, publicity, announcements, posts, videos, photographs, and discussions by a diverse audience. Internet technologies provide us, HIV Prevention Programmers, with opportunities to:

1. Reach people who are interested in the issue, but are outside of our geographical space,
2. Display and publicise content, which is important for all stakeholders to share in,
3. Move beyond the limits presented by face-to-face meetings, e.g. no or poor attendance,
4. Encourage participation and support in multiple ways, such as recruitment, making and reading posts, donations, participation in discussions, uploading and sharing links, and promotion & publicity,
5. Mobilise and manage large numbers of people, which is difficult in a paper-based off-line environment, and
6. Influence friends and people in our personal networks to support issues that are of concern to us.

In order for the message of HIV Prevention for Youth to remain relevant, we must integrate Internet technologies into our traditional modes of communication, education, and mobilization. This will increase the level of interactivity and thereby generate new energy to make HIV programming more effective. Young people are already creating and mobilizing members for their own groups on the Internet--they spend substantial amounts of time meeting and interacting with friends, networking with new individuals and groups, and sharing significant information. This is all done at very little cost, is highly effective and organised, and as they say it's viral or catchy, facilitates interaction and inclusiveness, is attractive, and enables young people to easily integrate it within their usual schedules.

Now that I have articulated some of the benefits of integrating Internet technologies into HIV Prevention programming for youth, I will use this opportunity to introduce Ms. Shellie Ann Anderson who rose to the position of Top Recruiter in the Facebook Cause, an online support group that was created in August 2008 to mobilise members of the Jamaican and wider community to support the issue. Ms. Anderson will briefly speak about her decision to become a member of the Facebook Cause and Group and what has motivated her to contribute to their growth and the strengthening of our online presence.

Ms. Shellie Ann Anderson

A few months ago St. Rachel saw a post that I made on another Facebook group and invited me to join the cause. I had no reservations whatsoever because HIV prevention and advocacy for people living with AIDS have always been really important to me. I have found it very disturbing, the fact that many young women around my age are ignorant of the risks they face while others are suffering from untreated STDs, and all because they have not been exposed to adequate information or perhaps overlooked it because it didn't really appeal to them.

Facebook is the most popular social networking site. Of the nearly 100 million websites that exist, it is number 5 in the world and number 6 in Jamaica. Our internet penetration is nearing 60 percent, so it is clear that Facebook has great potential for reaching out to Jamaica's young people.

Sites like Facebook can do virtually anything – all that can be done through print and other electronic media can be done online and Facebook, especially, does all this in a way that mimics real-life interaction among friends.

Young people are comfortable on the internet for 2 main reasons:

Firstly, as users we are able to respond to content, whether through our own blogs or direct comments. The Internet function as well as it does, because all users are allowed to be contributors. This interactivity makes the web more appealing to younger people. Polls, surveys and quizzes can be made more interesting as we feel more involved. Our interests are held for longer than by watching TV or reading the newspaper as we are more interested in environments through which we can learn by sharing, and Facebook groups and causes provide exactly that.

Secondly, Confidentiality and anonymity should be very important to any advocacy campaign. Young people are usually more comfortable discussing issues online because we do not have to share our true identity in any forum.

I think that the next generation of counselling should be where young people can seek advice online through a series of private messages. This would be really effective as there are not many reservations on the internet – you do not have to face anyone so you can freely express yourself without fear of being judged.

Through being a virtual volunteer for the cause and collaborating with others in the Facebook group, I have been exposed to many resources that have taught me more about the Jamaican situation as it pertains to HIV/AIDS. My new-found knowledge has given me a stronger voice in influencing policy-makers by sharing ideas that will help in lobbying for improved strategies and more comprehensive legislation.

I anticipate that I will be able to play a great part in reducing the prevalence of HIV among my peers and promote positive values, attitudes and practices towards the pandemic. I will do all this by using Facebook to help heighten awareness on the issues relevant to sexual and reproductive health and I urge all of you here today to employ the web as a means of championing our unified cause of HIV Prevention for Girls and Young Women.